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## GLIMPSES AT THE MIND OF A WAITRESS

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Last June a friend and I, two teachers with a commingled yearning for adventure and philanthropy, resolved to submerge ourselves still further into the masses than we are by nature. For some time we vibrated between work in a laundry, a saloon, and a restaurant, but at last we took positions as waitresses. We secured them in a fashionable apartment house much frequented by army and navy officers, serving in the café connected with the house. Here we earned fifteen dollars a month and board and room. We had to do our laundry ourselves or pay for it, and we were required to wear white shirt-waist and aprons and to have them always clean. If we were not spotless our mistress, whom we will call Mrs. Jones for convenience sake, had no scruples about telling us so. Considering that she neither did the laundry nor paid the bills, this was but natural.

Our duties consisted in setting the tables, waiting on them, clearing them, and washing the silver and glass. After we had finished this work, we were given extras, such as polishing silver. Usually there were also trays to be prepared, taken to rooms, and later brought back and cleared. This fell to the waitress at whose table the person sat, and she was expected to prepare anything not on the bill of fare, such as toast or eggs.

We were expected to be in the dining-room about 7:30 in the morning, and at night, working as rapidly as possible, we would be through about nine o'clock. Every other afternoon two of us were relieved about three o'clock, and came up again about a quarter to six, while the others stayed to prepare the salad for dinner, answer the bell, and do anything that turned up. Sometimes we had an hour to ourselves in the morning, but more often not. That is, we had as a rule a thirteen-hour day, with a break of three hours in it every other day. We had no afternoon

off and we worked seven days in the week. This is literal. No time ought to be taken out for meals, for we had no table to sit down at, and ate on the run, so to speak. We filled a plate with what we could find, and perched on a stool, and gulped the food down amid the sights and smells of dishwashing, with dirty dishes all about us, and the pile of scraps growing bigger every minute as the dish-washer pursued his merry way. Under such conditions, fifteen minutes is a liberal estimate for the time spent in a meal.

For food we had what was left—which was not much. As soon as the last guest was served, cake, fruit, and luxuries that would keep, were locked away. I should not object to this if we had had plenty of other things, but Mrs. Jones never counted in her nine servants when she bought, and so as a rule some or all of us had meager pickings. For breakfast we could have an egg if we chose, and usually some bacon was left, so that we did not suffer then. At lunch, however, we had literally nothing but bread and butter most of the time. For dinner, there were usually some kind of meat, potato, and vegetables, all cold because the cook would not take the trouble to keep them hot for us. Sometimes we had dessert, sometimes not, according to its character.

As a matter of fact, we were not very hungry, for we were not allowed to eat until we were through serving, and by that time the sight and smell of so much food had destroyed our appetites. We did not really get enough to eat for the work we were doing.

The work itself soon made us lame and bruised from head to foot. The bruises came as the direct result of carrying trays about five hours a day, pushing forcibly through swinging doors, and knocking ourselves against table corners and other pugnacious articles of furniture. All of us could display choice collections of black and blue spots, especially on the right side, since we turned to the right to push through the doors. Our arms ached from finger-tips to shoulders, and our backs and necks were lame from the strain of lifting the trays. Our feet were sore, swollen, and in some cases blistered, from being on them

so many hours a day. These things were true of all of us, not simply of the two teachers.

What was the effect of this bodily condition upon our mind? Our first waking consciousness was an ache. By degrees this localized itself, and we cautiously tried raising our arms, closing our hands, and so on, to see just how much hurt we were. Then it would occur to us that we ought to rise, and we would crawl out resignedly or profanely, according to our temperament. If sufficiently desperate, we went to sleep again, creating confusion in the dining-room as others tried to do our work.

All day long the back-ground of living was an ache. This showed itself in an indisposition to do anything more than was absolutely necessary, to sit down at every opportunity, to stand laxly in the dining-room, instead of being brisk and alert—in short to act like the typical shiftless servant. We soon were that. We were not on the lookout for work. On the contrary, we came to have a vague feeling of resentment against our mistress, and enjoyed taking advantage of her. The one who did the chamber work filched black- and white-headed pins, hair-pins, and other small articles, and kept us extravagantly supplied with towels. We ordered desserts for guests who were not there, and ate them ourselves. We supplied ourselves with plenty of ice-water for our rooms. We took every opportunity of proving to our own satisfaction that though our mistress could work us for thirteen hours a day, we could even the score in the end. Still, this puts the matter too definitely, for only the teachers so framed the case to themselves, and that humorously. Rather, the truth was that with this constant ache in the background, our minds became dulled, the inhibitions which usually prevent such belittling tricks were removed, and the ethical tone was lowered.

In just the same way all of us were careless about personal cleanliness. Mrs. Jones kept us to a certain standard of appearances, but we were too tired and indifferent to do more. Even we teachers were, after a few days, sore put to it to force ourselves to a bath at night, though we had a nicely appointed bathroom. During all the time we were there, no one used the

tub but ourselves. I can understand, too, why the others did not. They were too tired, and they did not realize that the bath would rest them. Then too, they had no kimonos to wear and could not go through the extra mental and physical effort involved in partially dressing after undressing. When one's senses are somewhat dulled, it does not take long to become accustomed to the results of infrequent bathing.

The same general effect was noticeable in other ways. Bear in mind that for thirteen hours a day all our living was concerned with the paraphernalia of eating. We saw, heard, and touched nothing else. When our hour of leisure came, we had no time to go down town and were too tired to walk, so that usually we lay on our beds and dozed instead of getting new sights and sounds. The effect upon me, and I think it was much the same with the rest, was that my mind became more and more engrossed in the present. In dozing off to sleep, I saw endless processions of knives and forks and smelt the reek of hot dish-water. In the daytime, my thoughts of outside interests, my friends, my books, even my family, all such thoughts became far away and uninteresting. They lost their tang. I was too confused in mind and too dulled to care whether my friends objected to my neglect, and I was far too tired to anticipate any pleasure from seeing or writing to them. I became a creature ruled chiefly by sensations.

The wider bearing of this is easily seen. Such a girl is not one who can improve her condition. All of us talked of getting better places. One of us, who had been a stenographer, actually rented a typewriter and began to acquire speed. But the average girl came, stayed until she was desperate, and departed without knowing what she would do next. Some impulse of freedom would seize her one day, and before night she would be gone, conscious only that she must go.

How, indeed, can a girl in such a place be expected to retain anything of mental freshness or moral poise? What incentive has she to use her mind on her work? We were worked by the day. As soon as we finished one thing, we were given another, and a time never came when Mrs. Jones could not find more for

us to do. At first my friend and I did about twice as much work as the others, for we were quick and willing. The only result was the satisfaction to our mistress. We had more and more work, with no increase of wages or shortening of hours. Tired as we were, with no chance of promotion, we would have been fools if we had not become malingerers as soon as possible. What was it to us if the silver had a slight extra polish? An additional ache in our arms! So much for the virtue of conscientiousness in work!

But how many of the sterner virtues ought we to expect from a girl who looks forward to such work all her life? Fortunately, most of them do not. There is the ubiquitous "gentleman friend" the only topic of conversation outside of the dining-room interests. Naturally, for he is the golden bow of promise. He is their only avenue of escape. It is small wonder that they take the first one who comes, and are quite satisfied if they only have a chance to "lie around." No wonder, too, that many of them prefer cheap boarding-houses to house-keeping, after years of such work as ours. The young man is the ideal, the hope of better things, to such girls, and to leave him out is an impossibility.

What will happen, then, if a girl has no place in which to see him, as was the case with us? We had not even a kitchen, for ours was in use until nine o'clock or later, and no girl will receive company under a fire of stares from her companions. Nor will she give up seeing him, so that either she must take him to her own room, or go out with him to walk or to some place of amusement, as is usually the case. Either alternative is bad. The two cannot get acquainted under simple, open conditions, and if marriage does follow, they may find each other's real character far different from the one displayed in the unusual circumstances of their meeting. Still more, if you imagine the wild craving for excitement that sometimes surges up in a girl bound down to excessive and monotonous work, you will understand how easily she might yield to any form of temptation. It is surprising that so few girls of this class use liquor.

If the girl has no "fellow," her condition is even worse,

unless she has some other strong interest. Genuine religious belief saves her, since she looks for a reward in the life to come. Some one dependent on her saves her. But if she chances to be alone, if she has only drudgery to expect, it would seem nearly inevitable that she should feel so damned already that nothing else could be worse. Such girls become reckless, if they have any fire of youth. They are the ones who fall by the way.

How far is the mistress blameworthy? Mrs. Jones was not a harsh or cruel woman. She was soft-spoken and in many respects fair-minded. At times she found fault, but upon legitimate occasions and in a proper way, while at other times she showed patience and forbearance under considerable provocation. Once in a while she "nagged" somewhat, but only when she was unusually worried, and I think none of us laid it up against her. We are all human. Her fault did not lie in any of these things, but in a total failure to put herself in our place. She honestly did not know that we worked thirteen hours a day until I told her. She was openly incredulous of it until I counted up the hours. I have no doubt that she would have denied it with indignation if anyone unable to prove it had made the assertion, and quite probably she has forgotten it long since, she was so unwilling to accept it.

I think she never tried to imagine the state of feeling which work for so many hours brings about, nor could she have done so if she had tried. That background of ache and lassitude so changes the values of life that I believe something of a gulf will always exist between the woman who has and the woman who has not possessed it. But Mrs. Jones did not even try to imagine it. She came among us physically fresh, alert, brisk, bright-eyed, and could not understand how we could be bleary, slouchy, and slow. After our day of work, she would ask one of us to go to her room to massage her, and would keep her there rubbing her for an hour, because she was "so completely exhausted." She was, for she had much mental worry—but in what condition did she suppose we were?

If she had stopped to think of it, probably she would have said, "Yes, the hours are long, but the work is easy." I grant

that it is unskilled, that it requires comparatively little mental ability; but let us see about the easiness. For about five hours, we had to load and carry trays weighing about twelve pounds. The rest of the time, our hands and bodies were exercised in all the movements of washing and wiping dishes, putting them away, and so on. The occupation is about paralleled by light gymnastics with half-pound dumb bells, with occasional walking. How would a person feel after eight hours of such gymnastics with five of heavier work coming at intervals?

Further, as our mistress lacked ability to imagine our bodily feelings, she lacked it in understanding our great need for variety, for something besides dishes and food. Here again her attitude was most naïve. When we gave notice that we were going, she asked under what sort of people we would work, with utter simplicity, "for you know, you will not often have a home of such culture and refinement as this." She must have thought that sweetness and light somehow oozed through the walls of her private apartment into the kitchen. I cannot account for her idea on any other basis, for we never went into any rooms except the kitchen and dining-room, and she never conversed with us on any subjects save those connected with eating.

This mistress, then, sinned chiefly in inability to imagine; and it is the sin that I have found in most of the mistresses with whom I have talked before and since this experience. She had herself done housework and therefore felt that she could criticize freely, but either she had never done as much as she expected of us, or had forgotten how it felt. She needed to live in the kitchen again.

Some will ask, "Why did not the girls complain of the work?" I wonder too, for she was not entirely unamenable to reason. But I think that they only showed a trait common to most people. How many teachers will bring a complaint to the school board or even to the principal? How many employees will carry a grievance to their employer? All of them will grumble to their fellows, but a combination of motives holds them back from complaint to the employer, a fear of losing their position, dislike to being thought a grumbler, and most of all,



probably, the inertia coming from the overwork itself, which holds the generality of mankind in the "station to which it has pleased God to call them."

This same inertia makes it wellnigh impossible for such girls to organize themselves so as to command an eight-hour day and better wages. Any woman who should undertake this would need leisure, or a tremendous amount of vitality in order to do it after her long working-day. In either case, she would need strong personal qualities, to draw these tired girls out to anything so stupid as a meeting. As a class, they seem unable to better themselves and the greatest consolation that I find in looking at them is that for most of them the young man is lurking in the background.

But I would not forget that there is another side to the story. We were irresponsible and neglectful of our mistress' interests. It was not unusual for a waitress who had been engaged not to come at all, while many who came left without telling Mrs. Jones that they were going. In the course of a day they would turn up for the money owing them, and always received it. The average servant, as we saw her, has little feeling that anything is due from her to her mistress. I had none myself. Is it not possible that many of the faults of which mistresses complain, aside from ignorance, rise from the half unconscious feeling in the servant's mind that, after all, the mistress has taken all that she can grab, and that she can easily go without the rest? Is not this feeling justified to some extent by their indefinite hours of work?

What is the solution? It would be premature for me to attempt an answer on the basis of a single experience. I have been giving only a snap shot at reality. But I would quote Jane Addams. She believes that the most essential thing is stated hours for work, and my past aches and pains urge me to add that the hours stated should be eight in number. What reasons can be given for making the average servant's day from one-third to one-half longer than anyone's else, especially when she works seven days in the week? An eight-hour day and six days in the week! What will become of dinner? I don't know—nor would I care if I were the waitress or cook!